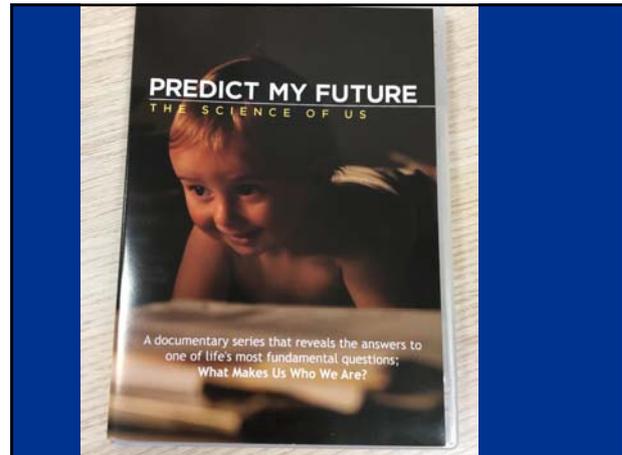


The importance of childhood self-control for a prosocial, successful life

Dr. Sandhya Ramrakha



Department of Psychology
University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand



Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit

Director
Professor Richie Poulton, FRSNZ



Department of Psychology
University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand



Outline

- ▶ Why self-control?
 - The Dunedin Study
 - Predicting adult outcomes
 - Adolescent mistakes
 - Costs to society
 - Implications

What is Self-control?

Self-control is the ability to regulate one's emotions, desires, and behaviours in the service of later rewards.

- Think before you speak or act
- Resist temptations
- Give considered response instead of an impulsive one
- Resist saying something inappropriate (or hurtful)
- Resist 'tit for tat' (hurting someone because that person hurt you)
- Resist jumping to conclusions

Self-control:

Studied by all behavioural sciences

- **PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY** Conscientiousness, impulsivity
- **CHILD PSYCHOLOGY** Delay of gratification, difficult temperament
- **ECONOMICS** Inter-temporal choice, reward discounting
- **NEUROSCIENCE** Executive function
- **PSYCHIATRY** Inattention-hyperactivity
- **MANAGEMENT SCIENCE** Will power, self-discipline

Why Study Self-control?

Childhood self-control predicts success and failure in adult life, above and beyond intelligence and family wealth



Self-control:

More necessary today than it used to be?

- **AVOID OBESITY** in an era of ready food availability
- **MAINTAIN FITNESS** in an era of sedentary jobs
- **SUSTAIN MARRIAGES** in an era of easy divorce
- **PREVENT ADDICTION** in an era of access to substances
- **RESIST SPENDING** in an era of sophisticated marketing
- **SAVE FOR OLD AGE** in an era without guaranteed pensions

Outline

- Why self-control?
- ▶ The Dunedin Study
- Predicting adult outcomes
- Adolescent mistakes
- Costs to society
- Implications

Measuring Childhood Self-control

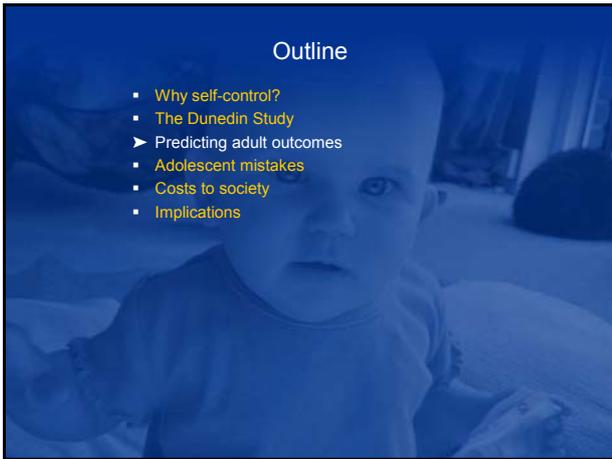
- **Predictor: A composite of ratings**
- **Persists across ages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 years**
- **Agreed upon by multiple reporters**
 - Staff observations of child's self-control in the clinic
 - Parents' reports
 - 4 different teachers' reports
 - Child's self-reports



- ✓ Impulsive, acts without thinking.
- ✓ Can't wait his or her turn.
- ✓ Low frustration tolerance.
- ✓ Dislikes effortful tasks.
- ✓ Fleeting attention, easily distracted.
- ✓ Lacks persistence, easily forgets goals.
- ✓ Often goes for the risky thing.
- ✓ Requires constant attention and motivation from an adult.

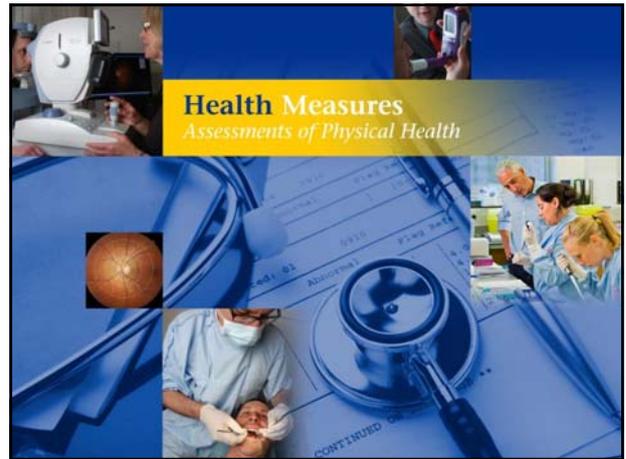
Outline

- Why self-control?
- The Dunedin Study
- ▶ Predicting adult outcomes
- Adolescent mistakes
- Costs to society
- Implications



Health Measures

Assessments of Physical Health



Cardiovascular fitness



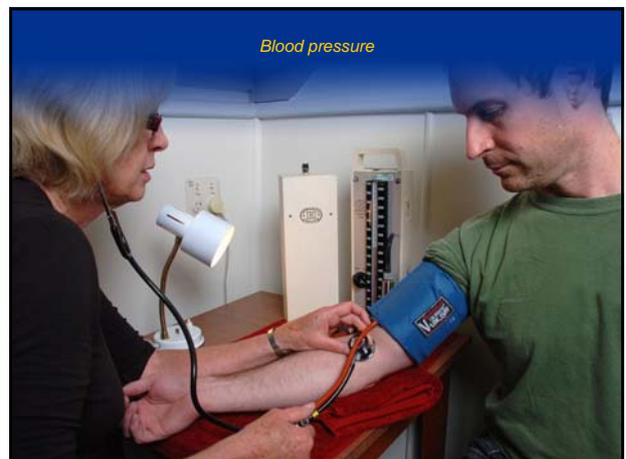
Anthropometrics

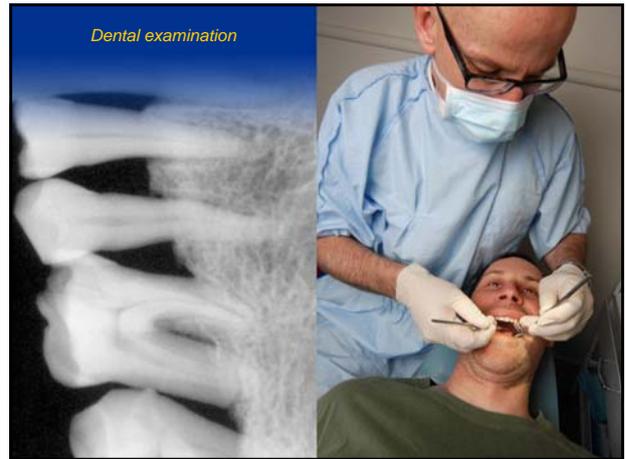


Cardiovascular health



Blood pressure





Health Outcomes:

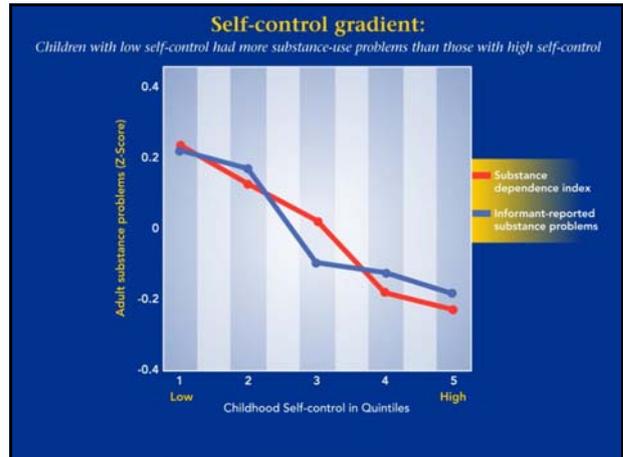
A count of clinical measures in adulthood

- Cluster of metabolic abnormalities (17%)
- E.g. obesity, blood pressure, cholesterol
- Periodontal disease (20%)
- Sexually-transmitted infection serology (18%)
- Inflammation biomarkers abnormal (20%)
- Respiratory airflow obstruction (17%)



Health Outcomes: DSM-IV substance dependence diagnoses in adulthood

- Tobacco dependence (19%)
- Alcohol dependence (8%)
- Cannabis dependence (5%)
- Harder Drug dependence (3%)
- Corroborated by informant reports



Wealth Measures Assessments of Financial Success

Adult wealth outcomes in adulthood

- Income in NZ dollars
- Occupational prestige



Financial planfulness in adulthood

- Attitudes toward saving and saving behaviour
- Financial building blocks

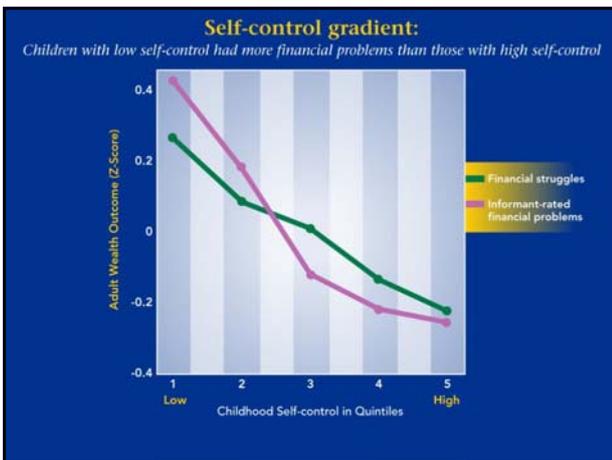
E.g.

- Is saving for the future important to you?
- Home ownership
- Investments
- Retirement plan
- Do you save money by putting money away and not touching it?



Financial struggles in adulthood: self & informant reports

- Money-management difficulties**
 - Do you find it difficult to meet the cost of...
 - Rent, mortgage
 - Phone or heating bills
 - Major repairs to car or house
 - Do you find yourself living paycheck to paycheck?
- Credit problems**
 - Turned down for a credit card
 - Sold belongings to a pawnbroker
 - Declared bankrupt



Crime Measures

Assessments of Criminal Outcomes

Criminal court convictions, age 18 to adulthood

New Zealand and Australian Police





- All analyses shown today controlled for four main alternative explanations...
- Gradients looked the same in
 - Children from high-income families
 - Children with above-average IQ
 - Girls
 - Children without ADHD diagnoses

- ### Outline
- Why self-control?
 - The Dunedin Study
 - Predicting adult outcomes
 - Adolescent mistakes
 - Costs to society
 - Implications

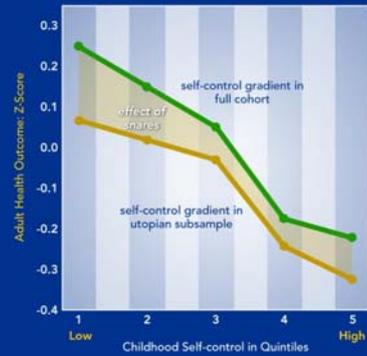


In the "utopian" subsample of the cohort who as teens...

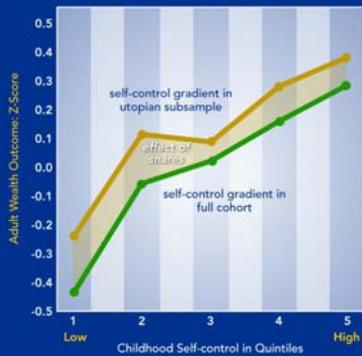
- did not smoke
- did not drop out of high school
- did not have an unplanned baby



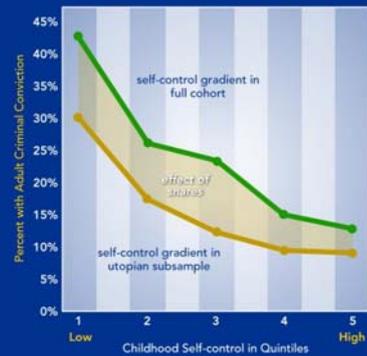
Number of Health Problems



Income

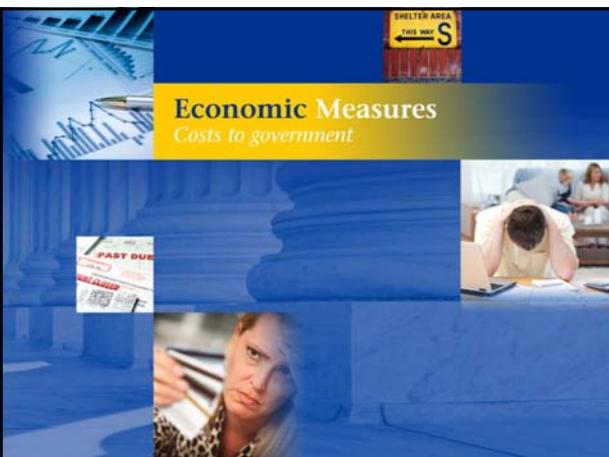


Adult Crime



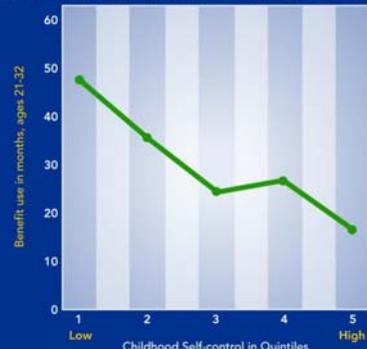
Economic Measures

Costs to government

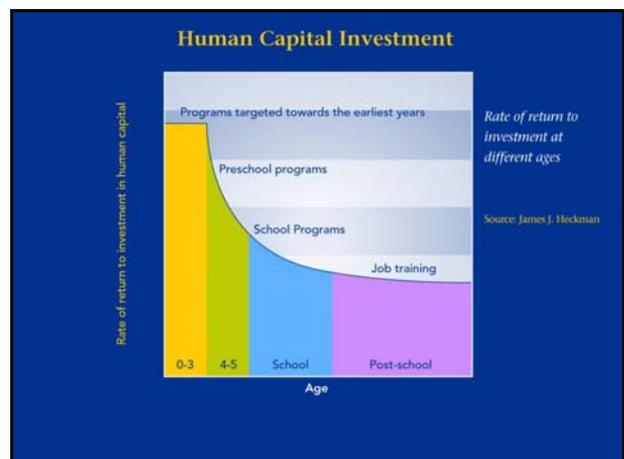
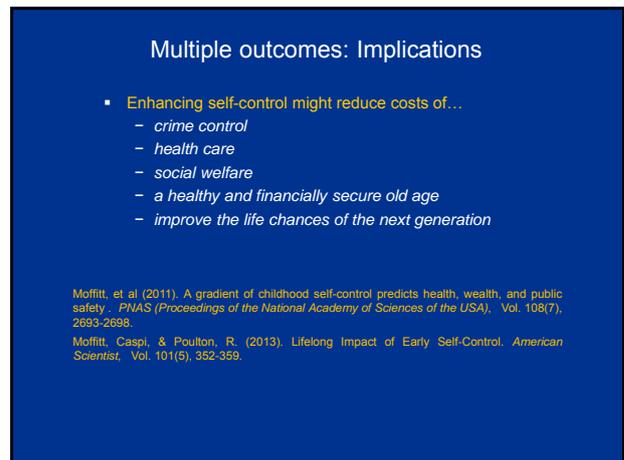
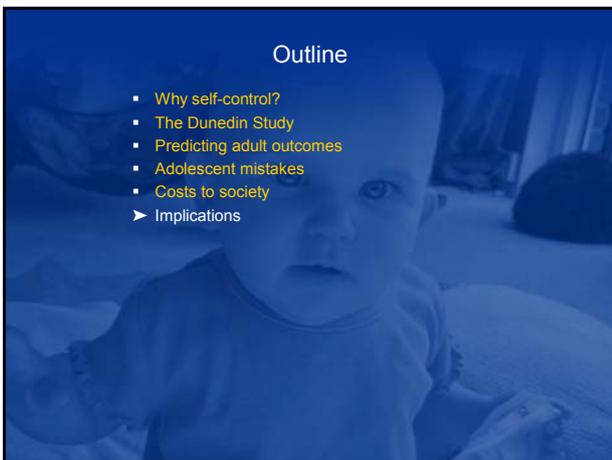


Costs to Government

Poor childhood self-control predicts duration of welfare-benefit use in adulthood



Welfare-benefit use records are from the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development



The self-control gradient: implications

- Targeted vs. universal intervention?
- Even children above average on self-control can benefit from better self-control skills
- Even intelligent children from well-to-do homes can benefit from better self-control skills
- The gradient implies universal enhancement



Acknowledgements

- This on-going research would not have been possible without the co-operation and commitment of the Study members, their families and friends over a long period of time.
- Core funding for the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit comes from the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

For copies of research articles referred to in this presentation or other information on the Study, contact Jenny McArthur:

☎ +64 3 479-8507 ✉ email: dmhdru@otago.ac.nz

http://www.otago.ac.nz/dunedin_study